



Loading

hot topics

- >> [Aerospace Safety & Accidents](#)
- >> [Astronomy](#)
- >> [Blogs](#)
- >> [Chinese Space Program](#)
- >> [Flight to Mars](#)
- >> [Jim's FAQ's](#)
- >> [Military Space](#)
- >> [Misc. Articles](#)
- >> [National Space Policy](#)
- >> [North Korean Space Inspection](#)
- >> [Reviews](#)
- >> [Russian Space Program](#)
- >> [Space Attic](#)
- >> [Space Folklore](#)
- >> [Space History](#)
- >> [Space Operations](#)
- >> [Space Shuttle Missions](#)
- >> [Space Station](#)
- >> [Space Tourism](#)
- >> [Technical Notes](#)
- >> [Terraforming](#)

profile

books

lectures

jim speaks

space links

humor

The Gemini 4 UFO

By James Oberg

[From quarterly magazine UFO REPORT (Fall 1981)]

Copyright 1981 James Oberg.

Many UFO researchers claim the object seen by astronaut James McDivitt is one of the best saucer sightings on record. Unfortunately, a close look at the evidence proves that just isn't so.

[image] What McDivitt might have seen: The beer can shaped Titan 11 stage at a distance. The infamous "tadpole" (upper right) could not have been taken looking into the glare of the sun since its background is too black. NOTE: This is a COMPOSITE illustration, using a cut-out of a ground photo of the Titan-2 second stage, and a typical Gemini window view. One still frame from the "tadpole" sequence is also in upper right.

Of the millions of UFO witnesses worldwide, probably the most reputable and respected are American astronauts. And of the dozens of reports associating astronauts with UFO encounters and photographs (most of which are exaggerated or entirely apocryphal), undoubtedly the best was the June 4, 1965 sighting reported by Maj. James McDivitt, command pilot of the two-man Gemini-4. His testimony baffled even the super-skeptical Condon Committee in 1969; a photograph from his flight has been widely hailed as one of the "best UFO photos ever made."

Yet McDivitt himself has never made much of his sighting, however often he has politely retold the tale to fascinated audiences and interviewers. He remains of the mind that he saw some unidentified but still man-made piece of orbital debris. There is no evidence anybody took the slightest official notice, nor is there any record that the astronaut ever filed a UFO report with Project Blue Book.

NASA has always insisted -- and this view has since been supported by research from UFO skeptics -- that there was nothing at all mysterious about the encounter and that the object was clearly terrestrial in origin (Soviet or American). McDivitt's own booster rocket has been tagged as the culprit in some studies. The famous photograph, meanwhile, has been dismissed by McDivitt and by other investigators as having no connection with the sighting, but as showing instead only one of many miscellaneous blobs of light which abounded in the actual flight film (because of its tailed oval form, the photo has been dubbed the "Tadpole").

For UFO advocates, the issue is more complex. Some have cautioned that the "astronaut UFO reports" are a product of UFO-media dramatization, distortion, and even fraud. "Serious UFO researchers never believed most of them", wrote UFO historian Dr. David Jacobs in 1978. Dr. J. Allen Hynek, "professor UFO" and Director of the privately-funded Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) in Evanston, Illinois, repudiated an unresearched "case list" (assembled by UFO researcher George Fawcett) which had been included carelessly in his book *Edge of Reality* and told a Playboy interviewer in late 1977 that "I've been to Houston and seen the films, and I wasn't impressed." FATE associate editor Jerome Clark, professional UFO lecturer Stanton Friedman, and former NICAP director Stuart Nixon have voiced similar sentiments.

But other UFO promoters continue to accept the "true UFO" nature of the McDivitt encounter and champion its authenticity. It continues to reappear every year in new books, new magazine articles, and new tabloid sensations -- and most UFO buffs are probably quite impressed with the case.

The facts are plain. On June 3, 1965, Gemini-4 was launched into orbit 150 miles above the Earth's surface. Rookie astronauts McDivitt and White were headed for the USA's first long-duration flight, the first to attempt extensive visual observations and photography. On the second day, over Hawaii, the 35-year-old McDivitt reported seeing an object -- "like a beer can with an arm sticking out" -- which NASA officials later announced had been identified by Air Force space radars as the thousand-mile-distant Pegasus-2 (but that range was too great, it turned out, for McDivitt's object to have been the winged Pegasus satellite). Together with a mysterious "tadpole" photo, the McDivitt report has achieved UFO superstardom and has been firmly enshrined in UFO literature and lore.

McDivitt himself described his encounter many times. Here is how he summarized it on the Dick Cavett Show in November 1973 (as reported in FATE magazine, June 1974), "I was flying with Ed White. He was sleeping at the time so I don't have anybody to verify my story. We were drifting in space with the control engines shut down and all the instrumentation off (when) suddenly (an object) appeared in the

window. It had a very definite shape -- a cylindrical object -- it was white -- it had a long arm that stuck out on the side. I don't know whether it was a very small object up close or a very large object a long ways away. There was nothing to judge by. I really don't know how big it was. We had two cameras that were just floating in the spacecraft at the time, so I grabbed one and took a picture of (the object) and grabbed the other and took a picture. Then I turned on the rocket control systems because I was afraid we might hit it. At the time we were drifting -- without checking I have no idea which way we were going -- but as we drifted up a little farther the sun shone on the window of the spacecraft. The windshield was dirty -- just like in an automobile, you can't see through it. So I had the rocket control engines going again and moved the spacecraft so that the window was in darkness again -- the object was gone. I called down later and told them what had happened and they went back and checked their records of other space debris that was flying around but we were never able to identify what it could have been. The film was sent back to NASA and reviewed by some NASA film technicians. One of them selected what he thought was what we talked about, at least before I had a chance to review it. It was not the picture -- it was a picture of a sun reflection on the window."

A good place to start a careful reexamination of the case is with the "professional debunkers" who were themselves stumped by the report -- and had the honesty to say so. In 1968, the Air Force seemed anxious to wash its hands of the UFO business and find justification for closing down "Project Blue Book." The University of Colorado was contracted to make a study of the whole UFO phenomenon under the direction of Professor Condon. Most ufologists regard the "Condon Report" as a whitewash of the Air Force's role and as a deliberate attempt to slant evidence to fit a preconceived conclusion. Yet the Condon Committee endorsed the McDivitt UFO sighting.

Space scientist Dr. Franklin Roach found "visual sightings made by the astronauts while in orbit which, in the judgment of the writer [Roach], have not been adequately explained.... Unexplained sightings which have been gleaned from a great mass of reports are a challenge to the analyst. Especially puzzling is [McDivitt's sighting] of an object showing details such as arms protruding from a body having a noticeable angular extension. If the NORAD [Air Force] listing of objects near the GT-4 spacecraft at the time of the sighting is complete as it presumably is, we shall have to find a rational explanation or, alternatively, keep it on our list of unidentifieds."

This conclusion is typical of the power of "astronaut UFO sightings." Here is one such UFO case certified by the anti-UFO Condon Report, commissioned by the U.S. Air Force to do all they could to debunk the UFO phenomenon. Needless to say, this endorsement was received with tremendous enthusiasm and little criticism or further research on the part of ufologists.

But since 1969, when the Condon Report was published, some new resources have become available concerning McDivitt's UFO. Furthermore, Dr. Roach himself put his finger on the key to his forced endorsement of the McDivitt case, with the words "if the NORAD listing . . . is complete."

One of the primary early objectives of the Gemini-4 flight was to practice rendezvous operations with the Titan-II second stage. The Gemini thrust forward off the booster as soon as the spacecraft was put into orbit, but it quickly turned around and attempted to null out the velocity differences and make an approach to the spent rocket stage.

The attempt was soon concluded after the crew had used up a large fraction of the capsule's maneuvering fuel. The two spacecraft, however, were by that time in close parallel orbits, swinging first apart and then back together again in the course of each 90-minute revolution.

The attempt to rendezvous with the 27-foot-long, 10-foot-diameter, 6,000-pound stage highlighted difficulties in judging distances in space. McDivitt complained about not having proper equipment for judging range and range rate to a target: he was unable to do so by the naked eye alone: "I think that you can't tell distances from a single light," he concluded, proposing additional running lights for subsequent rendezvous targets. NASA concurred; it had estimated that McDivitt was consistently reporting he was five times closer to the stage than he really was -- possibly because of his excellent eyesight and his inexperience with visual targets of that shape and size. But that was the purpose of the flight: determine an astronaut's ability to "eyeball" other objects in space, and specify the kinds of equipment needed to do the job right.

The booster did not decay for at least 50 hours, according to tracking data later released by NORAD via the Goddard Space Flight Center. During that time it was close to the Gemini and then gradually pulled ahead of it on its decaying orbit. It was well within the 1,000 mile range specified by NORAD, yet it was not on the list of nearby satellites. Why not?

A reasonable hypothesis is that NASA had only asked about all other space objects, not specifying any debris associated with the Gemini itself. The NORAD computers would produce reports for only satellites launched before Gemini-4, ignoring any objects launched with it. Alternately, NORAD might not even have had accurate data on the booster, since most of its radars were in northern regions optimal for spotting Soviet space vehicles but beyond the range of American manned spacecraft. In 1965, NORAD had only one radar site which could have tracked satellites in the Gemini orbit.

An inquiry to the NORAD Directorate of Public Affairs did not produce a definitive solution. "Your comments on the NORAD role related to [Gemini 4] appear to be logical," replied NORAD Public Information Officer Del W. Kindschi, "but our space people tell me they no longer have copies of the messages that were sent to NASA Houston on the sightings," he added. How did McDivitt describe the UFO? His first report came in at Mission Elapsed Time (MET) 29 hours, 52 minutes, 17 seconds. Five minutes later he described it better. "It had big arms sticking out of it, it looked like. I only had it for a minute...."

On June 6th -- while the flight was still in progress -- ABC television science editor Jules Bergman reported that the UFO was really a secret U.S. military reconnaissance satellite. Bergman continued that space officials had been unable to identify it because the Department of Defense refused to admit the

existence of such a satellite. But that story is implausible at best and, to my knowledge, has never been restated.

At a news conference on June 11th, McDivitt gave more details about the object: "Near Hawaii... I saw a white object and it looked like it was cylindrical and it looked to me like there was a white arm sticking out of it . . . It looked a lot like an upper stage of a booster." The astronaut gave few additional details when interviewed by Dr. Roach of the Condon Committee in 1968: "McDivitt saw a cylindrical-shaped object with an antenna-like extension," Roach reported. "The appearance was something like the second phase [sic] of a Titan . . . It is McDivitt's opinion that the object was probably some unmanned satellite."

[image]A Gemini in orbit. Note the straps and poles which frequently hang off the ends of the spacecraft and might be confused as "arms."

Years later, McDivitt became something of a celebrity to UFO groups with his short modest story of a space UFO. He recalled the event on television talk shows, radio interviews, and on a special long-playing UFO record. For example, on the NBC-TV show "The Unexplained," subtitled "The UFO Connection" (Feb. 21, 1976), McDivitt related that "I just happened to look out the window and there in front of me was an object which was cylindrical in shape and had a pole sticking out there. It would be about the same relative shape as a beer can with a pencil sticking out one corner of it."

Speaking to Houston Post space reporter Jim Maloney late in 1975, McDivitt had given new details: "I never made a big deal out of it. It was something I definitely couldn't identify. I reported it to the ground . . . Ed was asleep and we were rotating at a pretty high rate in drifting flight. The windows were dirty, I recall . . . All of a sudden there was this white object out there. It looked like a beer can with a pencil sticking out of it at an angle. It had a definite cylinder shape, about three times as long as its diameter." Maloney adds that the astronaut estimated that he got a 30-second look at the object. Furthermore, McDivitt said, the space agency made no attempt to prevent his telling his UFO story.

The Air Force wasn't interested, either: McDivitt never even filed a UFO report with Project Blue Book or anyone else.

NASA did not bother with the story, it seems, because nobody was particularly puzzled by the object. When queried by Congressman Robert Michel (himself queried by a constituent), NASA Assistant Administrator for Legislative Affairs, Richard L. Callaghan, replied that "We believe it to be a rocket tank or spent second stage of a rocket."

So far, the object looked just like the second stage of a rocket, even (in McDivitt's own words) a lot like the second stage of a Titan-II. Why didn't McDivitt think it was his own booster rocket? Could he have seen his own booster and not recognized it?

The glare and contrasts of space can trick even an astronaut's eyesight, as illustrated by this sequence from the Gemini-4 voice tapes. Astronaut Edward White has just spotted an object out the window: "We've got an object out in front of us. It's not flashing like it's the booster. It appears that it's that type of an object unless it's picking up some glow from the sun. It appears a very bright, very bright object. (30-second pause) It was the booster. I can see the lights flashing on it now . . . Just as it goes into darkness, the reflection of the sun on the booster causes a very bright image. That's the object I had seen earlier."

During the close maneuvers around the Titan-II upper stage, one of the astronauts made several shots with a movie camera. The photograph was later released by the NASA HQ Public Affairs Office (PAO) and was widely distributed. It showed a beer can shaped cylinder floating in space above a cloudy horizon.

During a 1975 interview between Philip Klass (Aviation Week and Space Technology) and Col. Bernard Szczutkowski (USAF-ret.) of NORAD, Klass mentioned his interest in investigating and exposing UFO cases. Szczutkowski reached into his desk, pulled out a photo, and asked Klass: "Do you want to see a photo of McDivitt's UFO?" Klass quickly assented.

The NORAD officer handed Klass the PAO print of the Titan-II second stage. This, he told Klass, was what McDivitt had seen but was unable to identify. It was the Titan booster.

Klass obtained a copy of the photo from NORAD and sent it to McDivitt, asking if it did not closely correspond to his verbal description of the UFO he had seen. McDivitt replied:

"Thank you for sending me the slide of the Gemini-IV photograph. I very quickly identified the object in the photograph as the second stage of the Titan rocket which launched us . . . I am sure that this is not a photograph of the object which I described many times and which many people refer to as the Gemini IV UFO...."

The reasons which McDivitt gave for this certainty, however, were very revealing. It was not because the objects were shaped differently at all. Instead, McDivitt explained, "At the time I saw whatever that object was, the background was nothing but the black of deep space. There was not a horizon anywhere within my view." (Author's note: Roach described the field of view from a Gemini as follows: "The astronauts are able to see only . . . about three percent of the celestial sphere.")

McDivitt's reply to my preliminary 1976 identification of his UFO with the Titan-II second stage was equally explicit: "The reason I did not assume that the object I saw was the upper stage of the Titan II was simple. During the first orbit of our mission my job was to fly formation with the upper stage of the rocket. This I attempted to do, and I spent approximately one-and-a-half to two hours looking at this

upper stage from various angles and distances, and was quite familiar with its appearance. The object I saw later was indeed not the upper stage of the Titan II used in Gemini IV. It may have been a lot of other things, but it definitely was not that upper stage."

Keeping in mind that astronaut White, who had spent the same period watching the same booster, had already misidentified it at least once at a much closer range, let us take another look at the visual conditions under which McDivitt saw the object and consider if he might have made a mistake.

The smeared windows (White tried to clean them when he was outside the capsule but only made them worse) can certainly be a hindrance for visual identification of objects. Moreover, McDivitt described a point of view precisely the same as those which had fooled White: "My small end was up above the horizon so I couldn't see the horizon. As it came around towards the sun I saw the -- this other satellite, but then as the sun came in through the window I lost it because the sun was so bright." The CAPCOM asked for clarification, repeating, "Roger. You were looking into the sun, then, when you saw it?" McDivitt's reply was a single short phrase: "That's affirmative."

Was there anything which might have affected McDivitt's eyesight during this part of the flight? A space magazine reported two items of interest: "The 100 percent oxygen atmosphere created some red eyes during the first day or so of the flight..." Furthermore, "Operation of the waste collection systems was [sic] generally satisfactory, except for leakage of urine into the cabin . . . McDivitt at one point told the ground that 'I thought those fumes around 24 hours were bad. You ought to be up here now!'"

The pure oxygen irritated the astronauts' eyes after a day or so of exposure, and a subsequent mechanical failure made it worse. The spacecraft's breathing-oxygen tank overheated and threatened to pop its pressure relief valve, so Mission Control officials decided to vent the excess pressure through the cabin rather than risk the tank's unreachable valve from sticking open and draining everything -- the decision was made because the relief valve in the cabin could be manually closed by the astronauts in case of mechanical failure. To allow this procedure, the cabin air pressure had to rise to six pounds per square inch, significantly higher than the normal level which had already proved irritating to the crew's eyes. This buildup was initiated at Mission Elapsed Time 28 1/2 hours -- about an hour before McDivitt reported sighting his UFO.

Two months after the flight, NASA decided that another eye irritant had to be removed. "A blotting material to absorb excess moisture, which might have caused the eye and nose irritation of astronauts Edward White (L/Col., USAF) and James McDivitt (L/Col., . USAF) during the June 3 Gemini IV flight had been eliminated from the Gemini V spacecraft, NASA spokesmen said."

Did any of these three items really bother McDivitt and possibly adversely affect his eyesight? The following conversation took place after three days in space (at about Mission Elapsed Time 72 hours~ 43 minutes):

CAPCOM: Jim, the Flight Surgeon wonders if he can say anything about your eyes. Have you had any problems? Any drying or anything at all? McDivitt: Yes. Listen, I had a lot of trouble with my eyes at the end of the first day. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to hack it. But they have cleared up now.... CAPCOM: O.K. You don't have any problem at all now with them? McDivitt: No problem at all. Though I was really bad between about 18 hours and 36 hours. Readers note: As the transcripts show, the UFO was reported at 29 hours, 52 minutes.

During the 30 seconds or so that McDivitt had the object in sight, was he staring at it trying to identify it? By no means. He grabbed for two different cameras and exposed a few frames from each. The actual time he was watching the object cannot have been more than a few seconds.

One impression was that the object could have been on a collision course with the Gemini. This conclusion comes instinctively to a pilot when an object maintains a constant "angle off," not changing its relative position in his field of view. If the object crosses the field of view with any speed, it will not collide. Yet McDivitt recalled: "I was concerned that it was going to run into me." Roach interpreted further "The impression was not that the object was moving with the spacecraft but rather that it was closing in and that it was nearby. The reaction of the astronaut was that it might be necessary to take action to avoid collision." A pilot in the midst of a mid-air collision is also not going to pay much attention to the license number of the incoming object. Yet any satellite in a different orbit would have streaked by McDivitt's eyes in a matter of seconds, as was seen by other Gemini astronauts on other flights. On Gemini-11, for example, a near miss (less than 10 miles) with another satellite was seen by astronauts Conrad and Gordon, who never once suspected that a collision was imminent.

The "McDivitt UFO photo" -- the "tadpole" -- had a life entirely apart from the actual McDivitt UFO report. When pressed by newsmen for the photo which McDivitt had reportedly taken of the object, officials at the Public Affairs Office at NASA headquarters went through the flight film and selected a series of shots which they thought might have been the object. This was before McDivitt had a chance to review the film himself.

The original NASA caption on the photo (PAO 65-H-1013) was as follows: "This photograph . . . shows the satellite McDivitt observed on the 20th revolution i of his four-day space flight . . . he said the Gemini-4 spacecraft was turning and the sun was coming across the window when he filmed the object." Later, after consultation with the astronaut, NASA press officials changed the caption to read: "Astronaut James McDivitt photographed this sun flare through the spacecraft window.... McDivitt explained later after the flight that the sun was coming across the window as the spacecraft rolled, the sun rays struck a metal bolt, causing the flares in the camera lens."

This is hardly a useful photo to print. It is the kind that amateur photographers prefer to throw out. But under pressure from reporters who wanted to see "McDivitt's UFO," it was the best that NASA could come up with.

With just the photo and their imaginations, UFO writers soon integrated the blob into the "astronaut UFO mythology." For example, George Fawcett reported that "Jim McDivitt reported he photographed several . . . strange objects, including . . . an egg-shaped UFO with some sort of 'exhaust'."

Once the Condon committee had endorsed McDivitt's UFO in 1969, the reputation of the photograph grew. Often reprinted in UFO books and magazines, it became an important piece of UFO evidence. In 1975, NICAP in Washington, D.C. selected it as one of the four best UFO photographs ever made. Their choice was based on a pencilled note on the back of their print, which reported that McDivitt had told someone that this showed his UFO. Nobody at NICAP could remember when or where. McDivitt, elsewhere, consistently claims just the opposite: the photo was selected before he could inspect the film, and it does not show his UFO.

There has been some controversy over what became of the shots McDivitt really had made. Some UFO promoters have implied -- or even stated explicitly -- that the actual films were squirreled away by NASA and that McDivitt was never allowed to see them. But McDivitt disagrees: "In those days we didn't number the film magazines, we couldn't go back and say which pack of film it was on. But I looked through each and every film that we had and it just didn't appear there at all. But there are a lot of photographs that are blank or overexposed or underexposed." Elsewhere, the astronaut had worded it this way: "I reviewed the file myself a week or so later, frame by frame, and there was never anything that I saw in the pictures that looked like what I saw in space. the cameras were not set properly or the lighting wasn't right or something." The report by Franklin Roach that an object had been spotted ("the quality of the image and of the blown-up point were such that the object was seen only 'hazily' against the sky -- but he feels that a positive identification has been made" is how the Condon report put it) is some sort of error, since neither Roach nor McDivitt believes it -- and nobody remembers writing it.

The two most outspoken advocates of the "true UFO" status for the McDivitt UFO are James Harder, an engineering professor at the University of California at Berkeley and the director of research for the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO), and his young associate Brad Sparks. The main pillar of their argument seems to be studies of the "tadpole" films and an uncritical acceptance of the Condon report's conclusions.

At a UFO conference in Chicago in June 1977, Harder showed slides of the "tadpole" and criticized the official explanation: "One of my misguided critics [this author!] claimed that McDivitt . . . caught a reflection off some special bolt." In a Playboy interview the following January, he was quoted as saying that "that sort of 'explanation' really shows how bankrupt the critics' arguments can get." Harder and Sparks had difficulty getting their own arguments straight: Sparks, in a special privately-circulated report (Refuting the Skeptics, 1977), wrote that the bolt "would have to be flat and mirrorlike"; Harder, speaking at the Chicago UFO conference, reported that "the bolt had to have a convex reflecting surface of a very special sort." And neither UFO expert addressed the fact that McDivitt himself -- not the UFO skeptics and critics -- had given that explanation for the "tadpole."

Harder seemed to have paid little attention to McDivitt's testimony anyhow, saying that "he reported what he saw as being a cylinder with an antenna protruding, and it was clear it was close by . . . and closing in" when McDivitt never said "antenna," said explicitly he couldn't tell how far away was, and ventured that he thought it might have been closing. Harder's justification for ignoring McDivitt's testimony is that "McDivitt's consciousness was somehow changed and his perceptions were not what he thought they were, which is not after all so uncommon with ordinary UFO witnesses." He elaborated with Playboy: "The UFO influenced McDivitt's perceptions," he suggested as one possibility.

Again, Harder and Sparks confused their signals. Sparks happily accepted the sun glare and eye irritation factors which reduced McDivitt's visual acuity "These poor viewing conditions reduce the importance of McDivitt's visual observations and post-flight recognition almost to irrelevance -- that leaves the film." Harder attributes the perceptual gap to the UFO alone: "Eye irritation? Nonsense," he told Playboy.

Although there has never been any evidence to tie the tadpole image to McDivitt's actual UFO encounter, Harder and Sparks have accepted the connection as implicit and unarguable and have run on from that point. Sparks described the UFO as "a bright white ellipse with a curved bluish streamer doing a wave-like motion in space," which was "in sharp focus on the film." Hence, wrote Sparks, "the Gemini-4 space UFO remains unexplained." Harder was even more confused -- and confusing: "The object [sic!] itself shows . . . to be an orangish oval, about three by five degrees in apparent size; the Titan booster stage would have had to be within 100 yards . . . to have appeared that big." But McDivitt refutes Harder: the tadpole never appeared to be that size because the astronaut never watched it -- it has no connection with the real object McDivitt watched. Harder is undaunted and describes motion in the image: "That bluish flare . . . actually has a turbulence to it," he told the Chicago convention, "as you could expect a turbulent or plasma jet . . . This is one of the great unexplained pictures of the space program."

Harder rejects the booster explanation: "To have mistaken his own booster at 100 yards is something I just can't believe," he told the convention; to the Playboy interviewer, he asserted that such a suggestion was "an insult to McDivitt's intelligence and professional competence." But he fallaciously required the booster to be at the same range it would have had to have been in order to match the angular size of the tadpole, and McDivitt never said it had even come near to that size (in fact, McDivitt's testimony suggests that the angular size of his UFO was at least 10 times smaller, on the order of a 1/10th of a degree or less -- which could have been the booster about 10 miles away), far enough so as to be easily unrecognizable). So Harder's confusion led to a glaring fallacy in estimating the UFO's range and consequent ability of McDivitt to recognize it. But that's not the way Sparks describes the controversy of my published accounts of astronaut UFO sightings: "Oberg . . . has intentionally perpetrated an anti-UFO fraud on the unsuspecting public," he complained in 1977.

But who is perpetuating a fraud? Harder makes this kind of statement in Playboy: "Movies of a UFO were taken by astronaut James McDivitt. Yet his evidence, as far as we know, was never taken seriously by any government agency and is dismissed by professional skeptics." We've seen that this claim is

false: the McDivitt movies do not show a UFO, and McDivitt himself is the first to say he doesn't think his "beer can" was likely to be any alien spaceship or similarly extraordinary phenomenon.

To be fair, Harder and Sparks are far from the worst offenders. Sensational UFO literature is full of tales loosely based on the McDivitt case, portraying both astronauts watching in fascination as their UFO fades away into thin air. In one account the UFO had just kidnapped an Air Force cargo plane over the Bermuda Triangle. Another version of the story has been immortalized in comic strip form.

Meanwhile, the Condon Committee investigator, Dr. Franklin Roach, has explained -- in correspondence with me in 1977 -- what he had meant by the phrase "a challenge to the analyst." He wrote, "I meant that someone with more knowledge or patience than I had should analyze what the report meant. My feeling was that the 'analyst' would probably come up with a very natural explanation....: Congratulations to you for following up and making the obvious identification as the Gemini "booster- rocket." Roach had never meant to endorse the UFO nature of the event in any case, but his letter clearly stated that he felt the McDivitt case was closed with the publication of my preliminary conclusions in 1976 (even though the conclusions had been a little hard on Roach himself for not following up leads that in hindsight were 'obvious').

Is any conclusion possible after so many years, when the supporting evidence has been trashed and the eyewitness testimony has become fossilized by countless repetitions? The principal leg of the Roach/Condon endorsement -- that there weren't any candidate objects within 1,000 miles -- has been demolished by the recognized presence of the beer can-shaped Titan-II stage. McDivitt, more than a decade after the fact, refused to believe he could have misidentified that object -- but both his degraded eyesight and different viewing angle at the time of the sighting eliminate any reliability from that claim -- and years of UFO research have taught us the surprising lesson that pilots are, in truth, among the poorest observers of UFOs because of their instinctive pattern of perceiving visual stimuli primarily in terms of threats to their own vehicles. Lastly, this coincidence must be considered: that Gemini-4 was the only one of 10 manned flights in which a rendezvous was attempted (and nearly accomplished) with a beer can-shaped target; and that Gemini-4 was the only flight on which a crewman reported seeing an unidentified beer can-shaped object. [Note added in 1995: Gemini-7 also performed that feat, and Gemini-7 also has a "bogey" UFO story associated with it!]

If the case cannot be closed for certain, it at least cannot any longer stand as a particularly valuable piece of UFO evidence. All it has really proved is how readily some UFO researchers can adopt -- and adapt -- useful material to "prove" whatever they originally intended to prove, evidence notwithstanding. The Gemini-4 case is not evidence for UFOs.

[home](#) | [profile](#) | [articles](#) | [books](#) | [lectures](#) | [jim speaks](#) | [humor](#)
[links](#) | [email](#)

Copyright 2010 James Oberg. All Rights Reserved
Site Designed and Maintained by [YoeYo.com](#)